



## Building the Resilience of Your Military Family

Long deployment separations, difficult post-deployment adjustments, frequent moves, and major life changes caused by combat-related trauma or loss are just a few sources of stress and adversity for military families. While most families do very well managing the unique demands of military life, you may have noticed that some people and even entire families seem especially strong. They seem to have a remarkable ability to keep moving forward during periods of high stress and recover from traumatic experiences. Some people are naturally more resilient than others, but there are things you can do to improve your own and your family's resilience. This information will help you better understand what resilience is and how you can work to nurture it in your family.

### What is resilience?

One popular definition of resilience is the ability to withstand, recover and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands. Being resilient doesn't mean you avoid emotional pain and suffering when faced with a crisis. Instead, it means you're able to recover and even grow stronger from the experience. Experts are beginning to discover what makes some people more resilient than others and identify things we can do to increase resilience in ourselves and our families.

### Characteristics of resilient families

In *Strengthening Family Resilience*, (The Guilford Press, 2006), resilience specialist Dr. Froma Walsh identifies nine characteristics that resilient families share. These characteristics reveal the family belief systems, organizational patterns and communication/problem-solving skills that foster resilience in adults and children.

- **Finding meaning in adversity.** Resilient families view crises as shared challenges that together they can understand, manage and make meaningful in some way. They see their emotions as human and understandable under the circumstances and believe in their ability to learn from their experiences and move forward.
- **Positive outlook.** Resilient families have an optimistic rather than pessimistic view of life. Members see each other's strengths and offer encouragement to overcome difficulties or accept what can't be changed.
- **Transcendence and spirituality.** Resilient families have beliefs and values that offer meaning, purpose and connection beyond their personal lives and troubles. They find strength and comfort in their cultural and

religious traditions and experience spiritual inspiration in a variety of ways, including nature, the arts, service to others and faith in a higher power.

- **Flexibility.** Resilient families adapt to change. They're able to adjust their family roles and rules to fit new life challenges while maintaining the rituals and traditions that provide stability in their relationships. Their flexibility depends on strong, yet nurturing leadership, guidance, protection of children and mutual respect in the marital relationship.
- **Connectedness.** Resilient families pull together during times of crisis. They're able to function as a team and support each other while respecting individual needs, differences and boundaries.
- **Social and economic resources.** When they can't solve problems on their own, resilient families reach out for help by turning to extended family, friends, neighbors, community services and/or counseling.
- **Open emotional sharing.** Resilient families accept and encourage a wide range of emotional expression (joy, sadness, fear, silliness, etc.) in adults and children. Family members take responsibility for their own feelings and accept others who have different feelings. They value positive interactions and appreciate humor, even as they cope with difficult circumstances.
- **Clarity.** Resilient families practice clear, consistent and honest communication. Family members say what they mean and mean what they say; thus, they avoid sending vague, confusing or mixed messages to each other.
- **Collaborative problem solving.** Resilient families manage their difficulties by working together to understand a problem and identify ways to solve it. They make decisions together in ways that allow family members to disagree openly and then resolve those disagreements through negotiation, compromise and give-and-take. These families seek to repair the hurts and misunderstandings that go along with conflicts and act proactively to solve current problems and prevent future ones. They also learn from their mistakes.

### Increasing your family's resilience

If you're currently coping with a stressful situation such as the deployment of a loved one to a combat area or caring for a wounded warrior; if you're suffering from a loss or dealing with a crisis of any kind, there are things you can start doing right now to strengthen your own resilience and model resilience for your children. The American Psychological Association in its publication, *The Road to Resilience*, recommends ten ways to become more resilient when dealing with stress or adversity:

- **Make connections.** Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people

find that being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations or other local groups provides social support and can help restore hope. Assisting others in their time of need can also benefit the helper.

- **Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.** You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. Try looking beyond the present to brighter days a little farther down the line. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.
- **Accept that change is part of living.** Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on things you can change.
- **Move toward your goals.** Develop some realistic goals. Do something, however small, on a regular basis that helps you move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"
- **Take decisive actions.** Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.
- **Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** People often learn something about themselves and may find that they've grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, a greater sense of personal strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality and heightened appreciation for life.
- **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts helps build resilience.
- **Keep things in perspective.** Even when facing a painful event, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing it out of proportion.
- **Maintain a hopeful outlook.** An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try to visualize what you want instead of worrying about what you fear.
- **Take care of yourself.** Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

### Raising resilient children

Different factors, including temperament and intelligence, influence children's resilience. However, no influence is more important than the parenting they receive.

When parents model and teach their children the habits of resilient families, the children will already have many of the skills needed to cope with difficult situations when they occur. Still, during difficult times, children need additional support and attention from parents, even as the parents are dealing with the same difficulties themselves.

You can help build resilience in your children during times of stress or adversity by giving them as much of your time as you can. When you're with them, encourage communication by listening to their concerns and answering their questions with openness, honesty and reassurance.